

The Decline of Colonialism

The conflicts which led to World War II and the war itself managed to bring tremendous change to both Europe and the rest of the world. Although Britain, France, and the other Allied countries emerged from the conflict victorious over the aggressor nations of Germany, Italy, and Japan, the war marked the beginning of the disintegration of their colonial empires.

The war itself was an incentive for colonial-held states to aspire to their own independence. The Allies encouraged independence movements around the world in any state controlled by any Axis power. Such encouragement—intended to bring about the defeat of the Axis powers—did not stop nationalist movements after the war was over.

Ironically, the colonial powers who tried to stop colonists and their independence movements found themselves unable to put the genie back in the bottle. Once colonial subjects had tasted a bit of freedom and independence, they naturally wanted more. Following the war, colonists in European-controlled states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East pushed for greater autonomy or complete independence.

Such nationalist movements were sometimes complicated by the differences which existed between a state's colonial subjects. In Africa, for example—a continent whose people speak several thousand dialects and languages—nationalist movements were often fragmented, tribal, and at odds with one another.

Religion sometimes played a divisive role. In India, the independence movement of the 1940s was complicated by conflict between the Hindus and Muslims. In the Middle East, where most colonial subjects were Arab and Muslim, nationalist movements were difficult to direct, since not all nationalists were Arab or were members of rival sects of Islam.

Yet despite these complications, nationalist movements blossomed throughout the colonial world before, during, and especially after World War II. As we have seen, communist movements in China and French Indochina were among the examples of such political revolutions.

Elsewhere, political change was also in the wind. A prime example of an ultimately successful nationalist movement was India. A British colonial

state since the 19th century, the Indians had always disliked British rule. By World War I, a significant Indian independence movement was underway, under the leadership of Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi, a British-trained Indian lawyer.



Mahatma Gandhi

Through an endless campaign of civil disobedience and noncooperation with the British, the Indian independence movement finally achieved freedom from the British two years after World War II. Torn by Muslim and Hindu extremists, newly independent India was divided in 1947 into two states—India and Pakistan (formerly northwest India and populated by Muslims).

Such nationalist movements soon proliferated. As the British lost India, they also lost Ceylon and Burma (both in 1948), Malaya and Singapore (1957), and Borneo (1963). These changes and others eventually resulted in the freeing 500 million Asians from the colonial control of 50 million British.

Perhaps the continent most affected by colonial movements during the 1950s and 1960s was Africa. Only four African states—Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Liberia—had gained independence prior to World War II. By 1960, nationalist movements had won freedom in two dozen African states.

Review and Write

1. How did World War II encourage independence movements in many European-held colonies around the world?
2. What role did Gandhi play in the Indian independence movement during and after World War II? What role did religion play in that movement?